

# Vegetation deity

A **vegetation deity** is a nature deity whose disappearance and reappearance, or life, death and rebirth, embodies the growth cycle of plants. In nature worship, the deity can be a god or goddess with the ability to regenerate itself. A vegetation deity is often a fertility deity. The deity typically undergoes dismemberment (see *sparagmos*), scattering, and reintegration, as narrated in a myth or reenacted by a religious ritual. The cyclical pattern is given theological significance on themes such as immortality, resurrection, and reincarnation.<sup>[1]</sup> Vegetation myths have structural resemblances to certain creation myths in which parts of a primordial being's body generate aspects of the cosmos, such as the Norse myth of Ymir.<sup>[2]</sup>

In mythography of the 19th and early 20th century, as for example in *The Golden Bough* of J.G. Frazer, the figure is related to the "**corn spirit**", "corn" in this sense meaning grain in general. That triviality is giving the concept its tendency to turn into a meaningless generality, as Walter Friedrich Otto remarked of trying to use a "name as futile and yet pretentious as 'Vegetation deity'".<sup>[3]</sup>



Relief of libation to a vegetation goddess (ca. 2500 BC) found in ancient Girsu, at the Louvre.

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## Examples of vegetation myths

In the Mesopotamian tradition, during the journey of Inanna or Ishtar to the underworld, the earth becomes sterile, and neither humans nor animals are able to procreate. After confronting Ereshkigal, her sister and ruler of the underworld, Inanna is killed, but an emissary from the gods administers potions to restore her to life. She is allowed to return to the upper world only if someone else will take her place. Her husband, the vegetation god Dumuzi, agrees to spend half the year in the underworld, during which time vegetation dies off. His return brings regrowth.<sup>[4]</sup>

In ancient Egyptian religion, the cultural achievements of Osiris among the peoples of the earth provokes the envy of his brother Set, who kills and dismembers him. Osiris's wife Isis makes a journey to gather his fourteen scattered body parts. In some versions, she buries each part where she finds it, causing the desert to put forth vegetation. In other versions, she reassembles his body and resurrects him, and he then becomes the ruler of the afterlife.<sup>[4]</sup>

In European folklore, a woman's fertility has an influence on farming.<sup>[5]</sup> Vegetation goddess figurines from the Cucuteni-Trypillian culture have a lozenge and dot pattern that represents a sown field and female fertility.<sup>[6]</sup> The death of vegetation is also associated with the travel to the underworld of Ningishzida.<sup>[7]</sup>



Cucuteni-Trypillian figurine with a sown field pattern

## In Christianity

In the parables of Jesus, such as the Parable of the Sower, "the sower soweth the word" where the seed is the word of God.<sup>[8]</sup> The parables of the mustard seed and the growing seed explain the Kingdom of God where growth is due to God, not man,<sup>[9]</sup> and follows its own timetable.<sup>[10]</sup>

In the John 12:24,<sup>[11]</sup> the death and resurrection of Jesus is compared to a kernel that falls in the ground and dies, and then produces many seeds.<sup>[12]</sup> In many Christian traditions, Easter sunrise service or Resurrection Service is held in God's Acre where the bodies of the dead are "sown as seed." The sowing of seeds also refers to scattering of people away from their ancestral homeland.<sup>[13]</sup>

## List of vegetation deities

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Other examples of vegetation deities include:<sup>[14]</sup>

- Adonis (Greek)
- Attis (Greek)
- Ba'al (Canaanite)
- Baihua Xianzi, Goddess of Flowers (Chinese)
- Blodeuwedd (Welsh)
- Ceres (Roman)
- Cronus (Greek)
- Demeter (Greek)
- Dionysus (Greek)
- Jarilo (Slavic)
- Modron (Welsh)
- Mother Nature (global)
- Ningishzida (Mesopotamian)
- Osiris (Egyptian)
- Ouyang Xiu, God of Peony (Chinese)
- Pachamama (Incan)
- Persephone (Greek)
- Pi Rixiu, God of Peach Blossom (Chinese)
- Proserpina (Roman)
- Qu Yuan, God of Orchid (Chinese)
- Rauni (Finnish)
- Saturn (Roman)
- Su Dongpo, God of Peony (Chinese)
- Tammuz (Mesopotamian)
- Tao Qian, God of Chrysanthemum (Chinese)
- Xipe Totec (Aztec)
- Yang Wanli, God of Lavender (Chinese)
- Zhou Dunyi, God of Lotus (Chinese)

## See also

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- Apple Tree Man
- Earth mother
- Dying god
- Feldgeist, German corn spirits

- Greek primordial deities
- Green Man
- List of tree deities
- Myth and ritual
- Puer aeternus
- Sky father

## References

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2. Stookey, *Thematic Guide to World Mythology*, p. 100.
3. Walter F. Otto, *Dionysus: Myth and Cult*, translated by Robert B. Palmer (Indiana University Press, 1965), pp. 7–12.
4. Stookey, *Thematic Guide to World Mythology*, p. 99.
5. Gimbutas, The gods and goddesses of Old Europe, p. 201 ([https://books.google.com/books?id=SLACTsmH4aYC&pg=PA205&lpg=PA205&dq=sown+field&source=bl&ots=ycZReM9flc&sig=IMA4arVRRhmkUiClzUmu2sC30k&hl=en&ei=fhHVTqGkHsK4tgfN-6idAg&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=9&ved=0CF4Q6AEwCA#v=onepage&q=sown%20field&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=SLACTsmH4aYC&pg=PA205&lpg=PA205&dq=sown+field&source=bl&ots=ycZReM9flc&sig=IMA4arVRRhmkUiClzUmu2sC30k&hl=en&ei=fhHVTqGkHsK4tgfN-6idAg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=9&ved=0CF4Q6AEwCA#v=onepage&q=sown%20field&f=false))
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11. Text analysis John 12:24 (<http://biblos.com/john/12-24.htm>)
12. John 12:24 Parallel commentaries (<http://bible.cc/john/12-24.htm>)
13. "Diaspora" (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/diaspora>). Merriam Webster. Retrieved 2011-02-22.
14. Unless otherwise noted, examples in this list are from Stookey, *Thematic Guide to World Mythology*, p. 99.

## Further reading

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